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FROM USMISSION UNESCO PARIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: TPHY AORC OTRA PBTS EAID SENV WWT KSCI UNESCO
SUBJECT: USUNESCO - INTERNATIONAL OCEANOGRAPHIC COMMISSION READIES INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI WARNING SCHEME FOR JUNE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Reftel: State 60390

¶1. (SBU) Summary: International Oceanographic Commission (IOC) Executive Secretary Patricio Bernal on April 29 outlined the IOC's plans for implementation and funding of an Indian Ocean tsunami warning system in an April 29 meeting with OSTP Officer Gene Whitney and USUNESCO science officer. He reported that work was proceeding on a two-track process including rapid upgrade of sea-level tide gauges; he highlighted a challenging political context. Bernal reported that an early June experts meeting would prepare a technical scheme for submission to the IOC Assembly on June 22, 2005. He stressed the importance of synergies between the tsunami warning system and other earth observation systems in order to ensure long-term viability. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) OSTP Officer Gene Whitney's meeting with IOC Executive Secretary Bernal focused on the IOC's efforts to coordinate an Indian Ocean tsunami warning system. Bernal (please protect throughout) described a "strong vector of cooperation" that developed after the March 3-8 Paris Coordination meeting; the April 14-16 meeting in Mauritius was a chance to reach out to the donor community. The earlier "Flash appeal" for Humanitarian assistance generated a huge response, but it only involved six countries. A warning system needs to be set up for the entire Indian Ocean rim, involving 27 countries, requiring a sustained effort, Bernal stressed. The issue of data sharing remains a problem. He reported that the Indian Minister of Science and Technology told UNESCO DG Matsuura that India would be willing to exchange data; Bernal commented, "But we've heard that before."

Indian Ocean Tsunami Network: A Tricky Political Context.

¶3. (SBU) Queried on the status of plans for implementation and funding of the Indian Ocean tsunami warning system, Bernal said that the IOC usually works via national assets and the concerted action of member states. IOC takes care of "the glue," i.e., technical assistance, standards, and bringing experts together. In the case of the Indian Ocean, coordination via the IOC is important. But there is a need to balance this with a "national" approach in order to ensure that international cooperation works. Reactions of the "geo-political groupings" differ, Bernal mused. The Arabian Peninsula, with the exception of Oman, is "sitting back." Africa is "on the receiving end." Australia is looking to the threat posed by the Pacific, but wants to play a role in the Indian Ocean to balance or complement India. Indonesia doesn't want Thailand to dominate; Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia are thinking in the context of a Southeast Asian system. India has viewed the Pacific tsunami alert as a "U.S. system" and so has a "hands-off" instinct. China sees itself as a "big, regional power" and seeks a commensurate role.

¶4. (SBU) Bernal acknowledged that India, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand constitute a core "club." Conceding that they are the best-positioned to manage and maintain the system, he remarked, "Let them do it, as long as they work with experts in a larger context. This is the pragmatic way forward."

.And a Two-Track Technical Challenge

¶5. (SBU) In this political context, two "parallel" tracks have emerged. The first, a fast track, is to bring a network of sea-level tide gauges up to speed; Finland has provided 14. Gauges have been upgraded in India, Sri Lanka and Mauritius; Thailand is next. Within the next six months, there will be six new gauges in the East Indian Ocean, 15 in the West Indian Ocean.

¶6. (SBU) The second track entails a cautious approach; this includes the finalization of plans for the distribution of

DART sea buoy pressure sensors, of the type used in the Pacific for tsunami detection. Bernal noted a production bottleneck, as well as German interest in providing technical solutions. But he said a key goal was to promote "ownership" of the countries of the region. He questioned the real import of the German offer.

¶7. (SBU) Bernal predicted that in six months, the IOC will have coordinated an "immediate first response" in the way of an interim system of upgraded tide gauges for 21 states. By July 2006, a tsunami warning system will be in place in the Indian Ocean, including upgraded networks, upgraded monitoring of seismic activity, and the deployment of some DART buoys. Bernal expressed the hope that the system would eventually include a data processing center in Africa to promote preparedness in the entire region.

In Run-Up to IOC Assembly, Tech Team to Finalize Design

¶9. (SBU) Bernal reported that a technical team of 15 with the "best expertise" - including from the Indian Ocean region - would participate in a weekend meeting in the first week of June to prepare a technical plan to be submitted to the IOC Assembly on June 22. The team would include U.S. participant Myriam Baltuck.

¶10. (SBU) These experts will address issues including those relating to the fact that the Indian Ocean Alert system will probably include three or four centers. This will mean distributing data to several geophysical teams, mirroring calculations, and creating strong communication and back up; this is not necessarily the optimal technical solution, rather a concession to the political situation. The goal is to submit a plan addressing these problems (standard setting, mirroring, geographical tailoring of messages, satellites, bandwidth of communication channels) to the Assembly.

¶11. (SBU) Over the long term, another challenge to be addressed will be ensuring synergies with other earth observation systems, Bernal stressed, noting that tide gauges are also necessary in the context of GLOSS. A tsunami warning system must be integrated into GOOS: for

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example dart buoys should be placed near climate buoys in order to "leverage maintenance." If not, the tsunami system - by necessity left unused in periods of calm - will rust, Bernal predicted. Any single purpose system may be doomed to failure.

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